



Vespers, also called Evening Prayer, is one part of the Liturgy of the Hours or the Divine Office. In the Liturgy of the Hours, the Church fulfills Jesus' command to "pray always" (Luke 18:1; see also 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Through this prayer, the people of God sanctify the day by continual praise of God and prayers of intercession for the needs of the world.

Evening Prayer gives thanks for the day just past and makes an evening sacrifice of praise to God (see Psalm 141:1).

The structure of Evening Prayer is as follows:

Introductory Verse: The Prayer begins with the Sign of the Cross, a request for God's assistance, and a doxology of praise.

Hymn: The introduction is followed by a hymn suited to the season or event.

Psalmody: Singing or recitation of Psalms follows the hymn. At Evening Prayer, the psalmody consists of two psalms (or two parts of a longer psalm) and a canticle (or hymn) taken from the Epistles or the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. The Psalms are an important part of the Church's prayer. In praying the Psalms, the Church follows Jesus' example since He, too, prayed the Psalms (see, for example, Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 which quote Psalm 22 or Luke 23:46 which quotes Psalm 31). The New Testament canticles come from the earliest days of the Church.

Each Psalm is preceded by an antiphon. The antiphon calls attention to the spiritual meaning of the Psalm, particularly any meaning especially appropriate to the feast or season. When the Psalms are chanted, the antiphon gives the tone (or melody) for the singing.

Each Psalm is followed by a brief period of silent reflection. It may be followed by a short prayer highlighting important themes of the Psalm.

Scripture Reading: The Psalmody is followed by a reading from Sacred Scripture (the Bible). This reading may be followed by a period of silence or a brief reflection.

Responsory: A short responsory is sung or recited. This responsory highlights themes of the reading or the season and concludes with a doxology of praise.

Gospel Canticle: At Evening Prayer, those assembled sing or recite the Canticle of Mary, also called the Magnificat after the first word in the Latin text of this prayer. This canticle comes from Luke 1:46-55. Mary sang this song upon meeting her kinswoman Elizabeth, a meeting that took place shortly after Mary assented to God's plan that she bear His Son, Jesus. This Canticle is treated with the reverence given to the reading of the Gospel at Mass. It is introduced with an antiphon and the Sign of the Cross and it concludes with a doxology of praise and the repeating of the antiphon. At celebrations of particular solemnity, it may be accompanied by incense.

Intercessions: In the Intercessions, those assembled pray for the needs of the Church and the world. These Intercessions often include a prayer for those who have died.

Lord's Prayer: The Intercessions conclude with the Lord's Prayer (also called the "Our Father" or the "Pater Noster"). Jesus taught this prayer to His disciples when they asked how to pray (cf. Mt 6:9-13, Lk 11:2-4). In this prayer, the people join their voices to pray for the coming of God's kingdom and to ask God to provide for our needs, forgive our sins, and bring us to the joy of heaven. Each day the Our Father is prayed by the Church at Morning Prayer, at Evening Prayer, and at Mass.

Concluding Prayer: The celebrant then offers a final prayer of praise and intercession to God. This prayer is appropriate to the Church season.

Dismissal: Unless a layperson is presiding, the celebrant blesses the people and dismisses them from the celebration, inviting them to "Go in peace." When a layperson presides, those present ask the blessing of God and are dismissed as usual.

(adapted from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website)